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THE COLOURS OF LIFE: A.S. BYATT'S *THE MATISSE STORIES*

In his article "Notes of a Painter," published in *La Grande Revue* in 1908, Henri Matisse stated:

> What I am after, above all, is expression. [...] I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have for life and my way of expressing it.
>
> Expression to my way of thinking does not consist of the passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture. The whole arrangement of my pictures is expressive. The place occupied by figures or objects, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything plays a part. (qtd. in Barr 119)

He added that

> [t]he chief aim of color should be to serve expression as well as possible. [...] I discover the quality of colors in a purely instinctive way. (qtd. in Barr 121)

In one of the first studies of Matisse's art, published in 1907, i.e. at the time when the painter was establishing his own unique style, Guillaume Apollinaire noted that the eloquence of his works stemmed above all from "the combination of colors and lines" (Barr 101). At that stage of his multifarious career as a painter, Matisse shared with other Fauves a penchant for celebrating colour, which was to become a hallmark of his art. Arguing that Matisse was "the only Fauve who derived lasting benefit from the movement's unique dedication to saturated color," John Jacobus asserts that Matisse's entire career was "predicated upon refining this investigation" (18). Matisse admitted: "I feel through color, and it is therefore through color that my paintings will always be organized" (qtd. in Petit 396).

The Mattisean inspiration behind A.S. Byatt's *The Mattise Stories*[1] is founded not only on the references made to several of his paintings in the three narratives but also on the writer's conspicuous reliance on pictorial detail. The ekphrastic aspect of the stories is expressed through recurring descriptions of static, framed scenes as well as a profusion of adjectives denoting colour or shape. Bruce Brawer describes Byatt's stories as "unusually painterly in their particulars of form, color and shadow" (n. p.), whereas Catherine Mari observes that the stories demand to be seen, not just read (qtd. in Petit 95–96). To the extent to which this is possible in textual art, Byatt tries to achieve the effect that Henry James described in "The Art of Fiction"[2] as the novelist's competition with the painter "to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle" (861). Unsurprisingly in fiction which emphasises the visual, in Byatt's narratives showing prevails over telling, with "showing" in this instance to be understood quite literally as the representation of a series of captured scenes, indicative of the veiled stories of the characters' lives. It will be argued here that, following Matisse's aesthetics, Byatt deploys colour as a mode of expression. The meticulous evocations of colours in her stories serve to conjure up a location, to convey the ambiance of a place and the nature of the people who inhabit it; colours are an index to the characters' personalities, their self-image and mode of living.

In "Medusa's Ankles," the first of the stories, the text's pictorial referent is *Le Nu rose*, a copy of which, placed in the window of a hairdresser's salon, entices the heroine to enter and become a regular client. Her pleasant surprise that this salon attracts customers by displaying "that lavish and complex creature" rather than the usual model girls (3) hints at Susannah's personal problems: she struggles with ageing, the loss of her beauty and her youthful shape, and feels vulnerable when faced with youthful bodily perfection. In the character's experience hairdressing shops are associated with the changing ideals of female beauty. Her memories stretch back to the 1940s images of women with blonde pageboys and red lips while she recollects her first "set," in imitation of her mother's unnaturally rolled up hair, as her initiation into womanhood. Her subsequent long-term avoidance of hairdressers was a sign of her satisfaction with her natural appearance, which in her view needed no improvement. Consequently, her present visits to Lucian's salon are a concession to the inevitable process of ageing, which she self-deceptively reduces to a problem with her hair: "She had had to come back because her hair began

[1] Cf. Byatt in an interview: "[...] I am totally obsessed with Matisse. He sort of gets into everything I do. He's my touchstone for art, the importance of art, as opposed to anything else, in its purest, most uncompromising state" (Frumkes n. p.).

[2] Byatt refers to James's essay in her *Portraits in Fiction* (Petit 96).

to grow old" (6). As long as she focuses on her hair, the problem seems manageable – although the process of ageing cannot be stopped, the hairdresser can easily effect a division between her corporeality and her image.

The salon offers the comfort and contentment that Matisse's paintings such as *Le Nu rose* emanate. Although quite ignorant of the identity of the painter, the hairdresser instinctively responded to and appreciated the mood of calm, the confidence and the striking balance of colours characteristic of one of the best known of Matisse's works. Lucian quite unashamedly admits to his client that he decorated his establishment with this painting because it "went exactly with the colour-scheme" (4). In a series of humorous parallels, the hairdressing salon in Byatt's story becomes an inferior version of the artist's studio. The pinkish colours, soft lines and the soothing music played in the salon create a cozy atmosphere of intimacy and muted eroticism, intrinsic to Matisse's work, and via this pictorial association remind Susannah of the passionate days of her past. In a sudden flashback towards the end of the story the heroine pictures her younger self as a near perfect incarnation of Matisse's recumbent figure of the odalisque.

Several of Matisse's paintings feature the interior of his studio, with the painter occasionally interposing himself in the form of either fragments of his own body or his reflection in a mirror. In numerous variations of the studio motif, including his early painting *Carmelina* (1903) and the series of drawings *Nude in the Studio*, executed at the same time as *Le Nu rose*, the painter frequently used the device of mirror reflection as a form of dialogue between himself and his model (Jacobus 32–33; Barr 250–251). One such work, reproduced in Byatt's book (29), shows multiple mirror reflections of the artist and his female model.

In Byatt's story, Susannah and her hairdresser engage in a conversation while he works on her hair and she gradually observes the changes in her reflection in the mirror. Pleased with the results of Lucian's hairdressing art, she patiently suffers the indignity of being an immobilised sitter. In a comic reversal of Matisse's relations with his female models, it is the sitter that subjects the artisan's body to scrutiny as she observes fragments of his body and their reflections – mingled with her own – in the mirror:

> The first few times she came it was the trousers she remembered, better than his face, which she saw only in the mirror behind her own, and which she felt a middle – aged disinclination to study. A woman's relation with her hairdresser is anatomically odd. [...] Their eyes met in the mirror. (3–4)

What completes the reversal of roles is the fact that the stylist does not contemplate his sitter's beauty; ironically, while confessing to Susannah his need for beauty, he inadvertently excludes herself:

> "I don't want to put the best years of my life into making suburban old dears presentable," he said. "I want something more."
>
> "What?" she said, meeting his brooding stare above the wet mat of her mop. He puffed foam into it and said, "Beauty, I want beauty. I must have beauty. I want to sail on a yacht among the Greek isles, with beautiful people." He caught her eye. (9–10)

Susannah tacitly identifies with Lucian's wife, whom he disparages for her loss of good looks. Ignoring Susannah's justification of the process as inevitable and natural, just as he ignores his client's feminine sensitivities, Lucian announces his decision to abandon his wife, at the same time abandoning Susannah to the care of his new assistant. Susannah's fit of rage at the end of the story is the combined effect of sympathy with his ageing, abandoned wife and her own disappointment with the change in the salon's décor – involving the removal of Matisse's pink nude and the colour scheme that the painting had helped to create. All this leads Susannah to a depressing revelation of her ugliness and unattractiveness.

The new décor is aligned with the heroine's feelings of personal dejection. The warm colours and soft lines have given way to rectangular shapes and a predominance of grey, which dampens Susannah's spirits and causes her to feel older:

> The colour scheme was one she particularly disliked. Everything was changed. The blue trollies had been replaced with high-tech steely ones, the ceiling lowered, the faintly aquarial plate glass was replaced with storm-grey-one-way-see-through--no-glare which made even bright days dull ones. [...] Her face in the mirror was grey, had lost the deceptive rosy haze of the earlier lighting. (15–16)

The waning of the colour and the light corresponds to the ebbing away of the character's vitality, which she metonymically represents to herself as the deterioration of her hair: "[Her hair] needed understanding, these days, it was not much any more, its life was fading from it" (16).

In the unflattering greyness of the interior, neglected by her stylist and confronted with the reflection in the mirror of her Medusa-like stony face crowned with wet strands of piled hair, she flares up, and the new hairdresser's incompetence is only the superficial cause of her outburst. The real cause of her breakdown is the futility of her struggle against transience: "'*I look like a middle-aged woman with a hair-do*.' She could see them all looking at each other, sharing the knowledge that this was exactly what she was. [...] 'I want my real hair back'" (24). The outburst is indicative of Susannah's refusal to acknowledge her reflection in the mirror as an imitation of her real looks; she cultivates another self-image which she tries to protect from the ravages of time.

In accord with the colour tropes brought into play in the story, her anger is represented as "seeing red," literally and metaphorically: "Rage rose in her, for the fat-ankled woman, like a red flood, up from her thighs across her chest, up her neck, it must flare like a flag in her face, but how to tell in this daft cruel grey light?" (23). Candia McWilliam's assertion that the subject of Byatt's *Matisse Stories* is in fact mortality, is especially pertinent to "The Medusa's Ankles." Susannah's rebellion against extinction is symbolically expressed as an attempt to restore colour. By breaking the uncomplimentary mirrors and smashing pots of hair dye, the heroine turns the metallically grey studio into a Fauve-like riot of vibrant colours: "It was a strange empty battlefield, full of glittering fragments and sweet-smelling rivulets and puddles of venous-blue and fuchsia-red unguents, patches of crimson-streaked foam and odd intense spills of orange henna or cobalt and copper" (26). In an ironic twist to the story, she achieves a temporary success as her husband after all appreciates her new hairdo and comments that she looks noticeably younger.

The same device of indirect characterisation by means of colour symbolism and alignment of the plot with a change of colours is employed in the second story, called "Art Work." The expository part is derived directly from Matisse's *Le Silence habité des maisons*. In this painting, a dark interior is contrasted with an open window giving a glimpse of a colourful garden. *Le Silence* is representative of Matisse's experimentation with spatial arrangements, especially his propensity to explore the boundary between the interior and the exterior (Crepaldi 99). Byatt's narrator, "draw[ing] upon and echo[ing] the contemplative mood of Matisse's *tableau*" (Fishwick 57), guides the reader in a detailed examination of the interior of the Dennisons' house. In the opening passage the reader is invited to focus his gaze on the various silent rooms one by one, as if they formed a geometric painting framed by the walls of the house. In the course of the story it emerges that the deceptively serene surface conceals deep-rooted domestic tension. The indefinite outlines of the setting and the blank faces of the inhabitants, which initially correspond to Matisse's obscure interior and his *visages vides* (cf. Crepaldi 124), are given depth and colour as more and more details are disclosed. Debbie Dennison, introduced in a conspicuously painterly manner, at first resembles the calm female figure from Matisse's work: "A silence. Debbie sits over her typewriter with her oval chin in her long hands, and her black hair coiled gracefully in her neck. It is easy to see where [her daughter's] ink and ivory beauty comes from" (35).

The preliminary depiction of silence, stability and symmetry is disrupted in the course of the story, which is based on an ironic reversal in the social and artistic status of the main characters. This potential for change inheres in the contradictions and hidden tensions beneath the flat surface of the Den-

nisons' seemingly quiet life. Debbie does not quite practise what she preaches as a professional working for a women's magazine: "[...] she is the design editor of *A Woman's Place*, of which the, perhaps obscure, premise is that a woman's place is not only, perhaps not even primarily, in the Home. Debbie is working at home at the moment because Jamie has chicken pox and the doctor is coming [...]" (36). Although professionally more successful, Debbie has subordinated her life to her husband, who contributes little to supporting the family because his artistic achievements do not match his high aspirations. Robin's career as a painter has come to a halt since he has been unable to sustain his one-time spontaneous creative delight in colours:

> He can still remember the illicit, it seemed to him, burst out of sensuous delight with which he saw the wet carmine trail of his first flick of the brush, the slow circling of the wet hairs in a cobalt pool, the dashes of yellow ochre and orange, as he conjured up, on matt white, wet and sinuous fish-tails and fins. (55–56)

Fascinated with Matisse and Van Gogh, Robin himself is a still-life painter, trying to achieve a similar effect of light and colour through permutations of a set of carefully chosen objects: "What they have in common is a certain kind of glossy, very brightly coloured solidity. They are the small icons of a cult of colour" (62). Dissatisfied with his attempts, he is paralysed in ritualistic repetitions, arranging and rearranging the objects (aptly dubbed by his family his "fetishes"), unable to move beyond that stage. It is clear that Robin's failure results from the discrepancy between his personality and the artistic style he is stubbornly trying to pursue. A naturally reticent and recalcitrant man, he lacks the openness and *joie de vivre* apparently required to emulate Matisse. Robin's youthful appreciation of "the pure sensuousness" of Matisse's *Luxe, calme et volupté* led him to undertake a journey to the South of France, to seek the same strong light. During his visit to the South in 1898–1899 Matisse had "his first protracted experience with the sun of the south of France" and was "bewitched by its intense exterior dazzle" (Jacobus 13). However, for Byatt's struggling artist the outcome was "a disaster": "He tried putting great washes of strong colour on the canvas, à la Matisse, à la Van Gogh, and it came out watery and feeble and absurd" (56–57).

Robin's immediate opponent is the cleaning lady, Mrs Brown. Both Robin and Debbie perceive her as their social inferior, and do not expect her to have any appreciation of art. Debbie's advertisement described their family as "artistic" to justify the untidiness of the house, but it later turns out that Mrs Brown is much more than a humble domestic, unresponsive to art. By performing her menial but indispensable chores, Mrs Brown comes to "hold [Debbie's world] together" (39). Laurence Petit points out that thanks to her movements "[u]p and down the stairs, joining all three floors" (Byatt 38), Mrs

Brown becomes "the spatial connector" unifying the elements that compose the picture of the house (Petit 405). She also functions as the organising principle in the story, finally bringing about a reconfiguration of the family's life.

Mrs Brown, to Robin's annoyance, rearranges his "fetishes" in her own way. The confrontations between Robin and Mrs Brown, although seemingly over her interference in his artistic sanctuary, are in fact conflicts between Robin's informed, but inept and self-aggrandising attempts at imitating Matisse, and Mrs Brown's intuitive comprehension of colour and composition. Robin has a theoretical knowledge of colour combinations, on which he sometimes condescendingly educates Mrs Brown in order to expose her supposed lack of artistic sense. His collection of objects includes "pure representations of single colours" and various shades of complementary colours, used to create painterly colour-schemes. However, Mrs Brown's natural sense of colour and line makes her see the inadequacy of Robin's compositions:

> "Geraniums are natural," said Mrs Brown.
> Robin stared at her abstractedly.
> "Natural red and green. They don't make yellow."
> "*Look*," said Robin, pushing together the soft heart and the hard apple. He could see the dance of unreal yellow. He was entranced.
> "Hmn," said Mrs Brown.
> "Can you see yellow?"
> "Well, a sort of, how shall I say, a sort of wriggling, a sort of shimmering. I see what you mean."
> "I try to make that happen, in the paintings."
> "So I see. It's interesting, once I know what you're up to." (67–68)

Likewise, the professional art critic who peruses Robin's paintings interprets them contrary to the artist's intentions. Although Robin claims that they are about the "inexhaustible problems [...] of light and colour," to Shona McRury they are "modern *vanitas*es [...] they're about the *littleness* of our life." Robin secretly admits that his problem is "the infinite terror of the brilliance of colour" (72–73).

By contrast (and contrary to her surname), Mrs Brown is an embodiment of the brilliance of colour. Dressed in fantastically vivid clothes, she seems like a figure from some of Matisse's paintings. When she is battered by her partner (a fact reported by the narrator in arrantly aesthetic terms), her bruised body is described as if it had been artistically transformed: "the chocolate and violent stains on the gold skin, the bloody cushions in her hair and the wine-coloured efflorescence on her lips" (44). She is especially reminiscent of the female figures Matisse painted during the period when he was fascinated with exoticism: "Her face has some resemblance to a primitive mask, cheeks in triangular planes" (40).

Mrs Brown's natural penchant for colour ("[...] I say, they're all there, the colours, God made 'em all, and mixes 'em all in His creatures" [60]), coupled with a modicum of Robin's lecturing, gives her the confidence – and artistic success – that he lacks. It turns out that for years she has been refashioning ordinary, banal objects. Her work achieves recognition as artistic objects when it is transferred from her home to an art gallery, in preference to Robin's paintings. The exhibits strike the viewers as brilliantly coloured and unusually shaped. The sensation she causes resembles the strong reactions to the famous Salon d'Automne of 1905, which included Matisse's paintings and which earned the artists the nickname "wild beasts." Unfavourable reviews of the exhibition commented on "some formless confusion of colors: blue, red, yellow, green; some splotches of pigment crudely juxtaposed [...] pictorial aberration [...] color madness, [...] unspeakable fantasies" (Barr 55–56). However, in Byatt's story Mrs Brown's work, although assessed as shocking and violent, immediately wins her recognition and elevates her to the status of an artist, to the chagrin of the "artistic family" who employ her. Full of vitality and intensity, her work is seen as a sign of her passion for life. For once, Robin's anger with Mrs Brown and his own frustration releases "a new kind of loosed, slightly savage energy in [his] use of colour and movement" (90).

"The Chinese Lobster," the last of the stories, revolves around a debate in which interpretations of Matisse's art reveal the characters' personalities and lifestyles. Gerda Himmelblau and Perry Diss are both elderly academics, meeting in a Chinese restaurant to discuss the case of an art student who has made Matisse a particular focus of her vilification of masculine representations of women in art. Perry Diss, a noted authority on the French painter, has been accused by the student of unfairly criticising her work and harassing her sexually. In the course of the scholars' conversation, despite their different perspectives on the case, it appears that the student's personal hatred of Matisse clearly stems from her inability to accept the qualities of *luxe, calme* and *volupté* which he celebrated in his art. The student's violent renunciation of Matisse's style corresponds to her denunciation of her self-image and her "bodily anxieties in the face of the rosy 'well-being' signified by many of Matisse's paintings" (Fishwick 62). The girl expresses her attitude by wearing dark shapeless clothes, described by Perry as "depressing." Perry appreciates Matisse for the same reason for which the girl cannot accept him – he is a painter of "silent bliss," "life and power" (121). Matisse's work *Luxe, calme et volupté* is referred to in the debate as typical of – as the painter once put it – the feeling he had for life and his way of expressing it (cf. Jacobus 23).

The conversation reveals that the evolution of Perry's perception of Matisse marked stages in his own life experience. As a young man, he saw mainly the decorative aspect of Matisse's art ("it was all easy and flat" [121]), but over

time he learnt to look beneath the surface and see Matisse's work as an exemplification of art's stance against transience. Alluding to Matisse's famous formulation that art should be "like an appeasing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue" ("Notes of a Painter," qtd. in Barr 122), Perry asserts:

> "Who is it that understands *pleasure*, Dr Himmelblau? Old men like me, who can only just remember their bones not hurting, who remember walking up a hill with a spring in their step like the red of the Red Studio. Blind men who have had their sight restored and get giddy with the colours of trees and plastic mugs and the *terrible blue* of the sky. Pleasure is *life*, Dr Himmelblau, and most of us don't have it, or not much, or mess it up, and when we see it in those blues, those roses, those oranges, that vermillion, we should fall down and worship – for it is *the thing itself*." (123–124)

It emerges that the scholars' conversation has a surface and a depth as well (cf. Jarniewicz 123). The vivacious and successful Perry Diss once attempted to commit suicide; Gerda Himmelblau recently observed her longtime friend's protracted demise and knows that she is "next in line" (129). Although the important things remain unsaid, Perry and Gerda silently share their thoughts: "She looks at Perry Diss who is looking at her. His eyes are half-closed, his expression is canny and watchful. He has used her secret image, the white room, accurately; they have shared it" (129). The white hospital room in which her friend slowly died has become for Gerda an emblem of "the depths of despair and the desire for death" (Fishwick 63), visualised as the fading of colour: "The colour goes from the world, so that the only stain on it is her own watching mind. Which it would be easy to wipe away" (129). Just as she has shared with Perry an intimation of mortality, on leaving the restaurant Gerda feels sympathy for the Chinese lobster, "still alive" in the glass box in the restaurant, and doomed to die: "Inside Gerda Himmelblau's ribs and cranium she experiences, in a way, the pain of alien fish-flesh contracting inside an exo-skeleton. She looks at the lobster and the crabs, taking accurate distant note of the loss of gloss, the attenuation of colour" (134). Her response is a combination of the natural horror of mortality and a detachment made possible by an aesthetic perspective.

In all the three stories, Matisse's paintings are positioned as unchanging objects against which the characters' evolving personalities may be assessed and with reference to which the progress of their lives may be measured. With their foregrounding of colour, the paintings encapsulate the vivacity and intensity of life which the characters inevitably lose as they face the prospect of ageing and the transience of life. By endowing Matisse's art with the capacity for capturing and preserving human passions against the flow of

time, the narratives hark back to the traditional dichotomy between the order and permanence of art and the contingency and transitoriness of human life.

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